A Time to Grieve: Women, Mourning and Remembrance in the Irish Diaspora Community.

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There were many times of mourning when I was a child. By the time I was a teenager half of my close family had died, including my father. This set us apart. Even as a child my family did funerals. It was other kids' families who did weddings. When Maddy Paxman, writing about the death of her husband the Irish American poet Michael Donaghy, said that your forties are when you enter the 'age of grief',[1] she was mapping out normal progression. As my school friends were rostered in to be bridesmaids and photographed in ill-fitting frocks, I was never called upon. The generation eligible for weddings was gone and with the loss of these relatives, cousins were also thin on the ground.

The generation who experienced WWII and its losses meant that there were gaps in my family that would affect those of us who had yet to be born. If one aunt could find no-one suitable to marry after the war, her sister (my mother) made the best of a bad deal and endured marriage with a man older than herself, my father, who was always tight lipped about his childhood. His eradication of his past was efficient. No evidence of his birth remains. When the Post Office was razed in Dublin

[1] Paxman(2014)*The Great Below: A Journey into Loss,* Garnet, London.

during The Rising of 1916,a generation lost their birth documents, but just as there are more men today who claim to have been fire-fighters during 9/11 than the entire New York Fire Department employed, many more Irish people claimed the burning of documents to escape their history. There are no documents or evidence of his family and all my known relatives are maternal.

My family were Irish (Ulster) through my father, and Irish through my mother's father (from what is now the Republic) and both were Catholic. In England we had 'English' relatives, through a much older half-sister of my mother's and that was it.

Not that long ago an elderly in-law told me that I had no family of my own. That same relative's version of the last war was that they had grown up as one of four siblings. All survived and all went on to have children and these became the next generation of cousins. Yet my mother was one of five, plus three older half-siblings from my widowed grandmothers' first marriage and out of this total of eight, there is not one full-cousin I can account for. No family of my own. Like a dirty mark or a bruise, I was aware of this oddness when I was a child, that there were gaps and absences which I could neither account for nor explain, while those I called 'aunt' or 'cousin' for convenience, were really no such thing.

It was those deaths and their effects; the soldier who did not return and so removed a generation from this mix, and of the other brothers who did, childlessness and early death took care of, while the aunt who could

find no one to marry as a consequence of war and loss, created a further gap where first cousins of my own age might have appeared.

What I remember is how my mother and her childless sister took control when the first deaths of which I have a memory occurred. However they were well practised; two of their brothers had died and an elder half-sister ran away and was never heard of again, my grandmother and grandfather had died, all before I was born, while on my father's side, there was already an absence in his refusal to claim any family, a loss usually associated with death, but in this case associated with silence and the unknown .

My mother's attitude was forged before the days of counselling, before what have been called 'practical approaches' towards bereavement and loss which now might include grief therapy, and before studies in the field of death allowed a questioning of what she believed. As a Catholic her father's suicide (as it transpired) was still classed as a crime, but was also considered by her family as the worst of sins, because to despair fatally means the victim has denied the possibility of God's salvation. This is so strong a transgression that many people can still not bring themselves to name it. My mother never could.

All I knew as a child was that my grandfather was buried away from the family plot, he was not in the family grave with the others but was cast out in what I only later realised was unsanctified ground. My mother's shame over her father's last desperate act was a terrible, silent experience no one spoke about until one day as a child I came downstairs

in the old house, from the back room where he had taken his life and in which they let me sleep whenever we visited, speaking of a man hanging from the wall. I was referring to the foliage patterned wallpaper which had made repeating faces of men in green. I talked of this innocently and naively. I could not fathom their terrified looks nor why my aunt got a priest round to bless the room. And this way I was able to gradually piece together my grandfather's last moments, and be told finally why he was buried under a holly bush with no stone to commemorate him.

It wasn't a funeral any of them cared to speak about. I think, like the brother whose body never returned from the trenches, it cheated them out of the burial rites they needed. But there was further unfinished business over their father's death as there was no space to grieve publicly, no book of condolences to sign. The only significant thing they possessed was a story of what my aunt had experienced that same afternoon, when she 'saw' her father and felt a sudden dread. He appeared silently before her at work, causing her to fetch my mother from another part of the sewing factory. Together they left work without permission and walked home, my mother bewildered and disturbed by her sister's silence. There is a common experience of seeing the soon to be deceased, of experiencing them some way, usually through dreams or a sudden memory. Years later my mother would find herself thinking of someone and not rest until she got that phone call through, simply to hear their voice, and know she had been wrong. My father, healthily sceptical, always took her seriously in those matters. Three dreams he used to say, and we call the priest and have a Mass said. Three dreams, like a link to

an older spoken form where things happen in threes to allow the speaker to remember, describe , and enhance, the pattern of three was something he did not question, a trinity of meaning reasserting itself unconsciously.

Edward Jeremy Miller, writing for bereavement counsellors explains the grief Catholics might feel as something akin to the Christian belief of Christ's death where 'God experienced death'. The most striking aspect for contemporary Catholics now is the focus on risen life (the resurrection). He charts the shift in social practice- from black vestments to white, and how the music itself has changed and he locates the *Dies Irea*, (a Latin hymn we sang as a school at the funeral of a girl in my year, in the 1970's) back into the medieval period from whence it came, (Thirteenth century Gregorian chanting). If the words of this are 'fearful and sober' and the entire thing is a reminder of the deceased's accountability before God, emphasis falls on the return to dust. Now there is apparently a focus on resurrection, on hope, on continuous life.[2] I certainly hope so. We sang the lyrics 'The fire shall scorch thee to the very bone, and Christ receive thy soul' for the family of a teenage girl who had been burnt to death in a freak accident. Not surprisingly many of us were distressed and faltered over these lines, causing a prefect from the lower sixth to bellow at us in the coach returning to the convent that we had

[2] Miller: 'A Roman Catholic View of Death', in Morgan & Laungani, (eds.) *Death and Bereavement Around the World*, Baywood Publishing Co, New York, 2002

been a disgrace for messing up the hymn and ought to be ashamed of ourselves. However, at the time we believed in the redemptive act of prayer on behalf of the dead, and the rites allowed us to act for them , which was usually a solace to the living .

Hard to imagine my mother's family dealing with their pariah status, which allowed them none of the above. That no prayers could help their father was their life-sentence. All they had was a story of a sighting by way of a memorial to him. In aboriginal Australian tradition it is believed that the spirit goes 'walkabout' and the dreams and memories are when the deceased disturbs the living on their travels. In this way people are able to visualise and retain the lost soul, lost doubly in my family's religious belief, which insisted that the suicide had no chance of redemption, but reclaimed through a common-sense process that reached further back beyond the teaching of the Catholic church and connected them to a fuller sense of what it was to be human and fallible.

After suicide, illegitimacy was the other great taboo which in the past had resulted in acts of desperation, including infanticide as an extreme (but not uncommon practice in 18/19 century Ireland). The mother's social transgression was never forgotten and it was common for the family to turn her 'adrift', worn out by scandal and embittered with this disgrace, and no doubt in the 20th century was part of my father's silence regarding his origins considering how

' even ... (the) children's children bore some of the brunt'. [3]

[3] Connell, K.H. *Irish Peasant Society,* Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1968 (p52)

As an author of short stories, I wrote ‘Dropstars Fall in Unknown Places’ a story set in the early days of the 20th century, which shows these older traditions being worked through. I attempted to recast an infanticide as a last, desperate act of love, in order to spare an illegitimate child from enduring the life of such harsh social castigation, the unbearable ‘shame’. Maybe I was reimagining the alternative for children such as my father, whose birth and existence seems to have been unwanted. In my story a mother takes the now dead body of her baby to a stone circle, linking the living and the dead to a time before the Catholic Church inscribed conditions onto female bodies. The elderly narrator who remembers the past thinks how ‘the family after this generation would have survived its massive fall from grace, it should be forgotten’. [4] Was my father’s silence about his origin the only way he could stop what he believed was a disgrace from falling onto us?

Despite such outcast status or because of it both my parents, who had direct experience of events which the church condemned, sought the church’s approval for themselves, rather than form a critique of such ideas, living as they did in a close parish of likeminded neighbours. But those supernatural aspects of death and dying which the church equally did not condone, lingered and were harder to shift. My mother saw the beansibh (banshee) (a supernatural female messenger or harbinger of death) at least twice in my experience, and her sister saw the lost spirit on the occasion of their father’s suicide. There is little emphasis in Irish

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[4] McCrory: *Bleeding Sinners*, Methuen, London , 1999, (p.115)

tradition for that latter form of revenant, while the supernatural wailing woman beyond the threshold of the house is a frequent and known image. This supernatural visitor, the harbinger of death, turned up in our yard twice, and it is the practical details I recall, that she appeared beneath a window that my mother claimed no window cleaner had touched for years. But our mother's fear was taken seriously each time by relatives who realised perhaps that some psychological elements were at work.

On mourning there was without doubt a fuller range of expectations and behaviours in the past. These usually fell heaviest on women, demanding silence in the official ceremony, and fulsome noise in private when beyond the jurisdiction of the church.

Looking at popular images of women as mourners Jennifer Hockey lists the Victorian widow in full mourning dress, the weeping mother of Christ and nineteenth- century grave sculptures of women 'grieving with abandonment' and the written accounts of women 'wailing during death rituals in traditional societies' . This leads her to claim a division in 'emotional labour' in which a role or performance of female grief might be expected. [5] There is something about the uses of abandonment and wailing , words that resonate and imply a state of theatricality. She questions if female grief- like female love, is depicted as something bottomless and different to that of men. Have we come to expect ... (an) .. 'essentially feminine response to death' ? However in public it is noted

[5] Hockley J. 'Women in grief: Cultural representation and social practice' in Field, Hockey & Small (eds.) *Death, Gender and Ethnicity,* Routledge, London,1997

that women are equally constrained by what is acceptable, and there are only a ‘limited set of clues’ which hint at grief while the idea of the bereaved woman still resonates strongly.[6]

The women in my family appeared to compromise, allowing the official funeral rites to run their course, but becoming vocal back on home ground. Away from the church, they would lead the memorials. Here they would relax into stories, which allowed them to remember things which might not be spoken easily till after the person was dead, hinting at histories and mishaps and occurrences long held secret. There was no speaking ill of the dead, but instead a piecing together of stories which would reveal the deceased in different ways, and sometimes explain them and their actions , and it was the women who led this.

The process of attending the wake and the funeral mass ‘provides the social supports…to the bereaved to begin the process of healing, of adapting to the loss of the deceased.’ [7]

‘Even when a counsellor is dealing with a so-called ‘’lapsed’’ or inactive Catholic, it must be remembered that such a person likely bears ‘’Catholic instincts’’ at a deeply subconscious level’ [8] In an article written ten years after the death of her husband, Paxman notes that we do not cope with grief and feels that the Victorians got it right. ‘How I could have done with a black armband to alert people’ she says, citing ‘the obligatory black

[6] Hockley J. ibid

[7] Miller: op cit

[8] Miller op cit

clothing, the withdrawal from daily life, the closed curtains' of that period. [9] But if such visible markers were ubiquitous they in turn became conventions, and as such may not have been as pronounced. In 'Women in grief' J. Hockey suggests that the high profile of the Victorian widow has been taken as an example for a more therapeutic if ritualised response to death. She disputes the image of Queen Victoria as the ' death encumbered figure ' claiming this is a modern construction of what, at the time ,was most likely being hidden in plain sight, ' social practice which can be described as conspicuous invisibility' [10]

In open social practice, the nineteenth century mourning clothes seemed to have reached a zenith when codes of dress reached through families, down to distant relations who may never have met the deceased .[11] Such dress conventions were always strongest for women, suggesting as always in the west that a woman's status and condition was dependant upon her relationship to a man and a woman must provide such external signs as are deemed 'usual' (the wedding ring, the change of name on legal documents).

While my mother took full advantage of the social conventions for my father's funeral, she relaxed into everyday wear immediately after. However there were unwritten codes of behaviour; to be seen laughing too loudly, to return to normal too quickly was viewed as improper, and

[9] Paxman, Why can't we cope with grief any more? *Daily Mail* .07.06.14

[10] Hockey, 1997 p.101

[11] Exhibition of Victorian Mourning at Pickfords' House Museum of Georgian Life and Costume, Derby, U.K. Autumn, 2009

we remained largely indoors for the best part of a fortnight post my father's death and funeral, for decency.

Today, there is a lack of instruction about how to behave, which leaves people craving some direction. 'This results from the loss of established death ritual, the requirement that private grief should somehow be signalled through a competent public performance, and a belief that expressing grief is the 'natural' and 'healthy' response to a death' writes Hockey. [12]

As part of female mourning the beansibh (banshee) with its grief stricken wailing served as a reminder of an older form of female expression, the caoin (keen) . This tradition of noise making and composing laments enabled women in particular to speak at burial. Knowledge of the beansibh (banshee) must have enabled an acceptance of women's voice as part of the ritual although long after this practice had died out by the early nineteenth century, the 'sighting' of the death visitor remained, and with the noise that frequently accompanied this, it certainly enabled mourners to talk about a death foretold. The shock of the image could be voiced openly, and maybe this operated like an echo, or memory of women's grief from the more distant past when it was acceptable practice to demonstrate mourning through wailing and creating noise.

On the practice of keening Angela Bourke writes in 'Lamenting the Dead'

[12] Hockey 1997, p93

'To the extent that it offers women a licence to speak loudly and without inhibition, and frequently to defend their own interests against those of men, caoineadh (keening) may be read as feminist utterance'. She notes the collaborative nature of the process, that women took turns to weep 'in a chorus of stylised sobbing ... Ochon agus ochon o !' [13] which suggests an agreement in community, and a method of showing individual grief supported by this belief. The women, it seems to claim, are in this together.

While that might still be the case, the public utterance has changed. The original managed caoin (keen) and the ritualised phrasing of a lament could only take place on a stage today, not at the mouth of a grave.

Another aspect of women in grief is expressed through the widow's curse (malact na baintri) Here, women without men could vent and accuse on behalf of the deceased. A sort of post-life reckoning which those left behind would shoulder for those no longer able to bear a grudge. More graceful is the lament, traditionally composed by the widow. The Lament for Art O'Laoghaire created by Eibhlin Dubh Ni Chonaill and dated as 1773, is one of the most famous of the female laments which were traditionally composed at the grave mouth and Bourke notes that this composition owes 'little or nothing to writing' and notes the flexibility of the tradition enabling 'poetry' to be composed, performed and

[13] Bourke (Vol IV pp.1365-1397) in Bourke, Kilfeather, et al (eds.) *The Field Day anthology of Irish Writing* : Vol s IV & V *Irish Women's Writing & Traditions*, Cork University Press, Cork, 2002

remembered. A structured traditional pattern allowed the speaker to fill in the phrases and collect their thoughts before the next phrase is created . This spoken lament, composed in performance and its 'formulaic' structure can be compared to those studies made by Albert.B. Lord on oral poetry and storytelling in the former Yugoslavia[14] This is where a familiar pattern and tradition allows a story to be retold according to certain structures which contain those key elements which preserve the nature of the original; the theme, the meaning and the main characters, yet allow the speaker to digress and adapt the tale anew.

Can we consider these Lament poets as part of the evolution of modern day grief therapy? Bourke reckons we can, 'they deal with the modern process of grieving, denial, anger, bargaining, sadness and acceptance' .[15]

In this structure the traditional curse can be safely fitted inside the pattern, and is employed here to accuse those who sought to harm the deceased during their lifetime. Art O'Laoghaire's widow calls bad luck down onto the man who caused her husband's death, 'Ruin and bad cess on you ugly traitor Morris who took the man of my house.' [16]

The secular funerals I have attended as an adult have been remarkable for their freedom, and for the effort families have made to design the

[14] Bourke, cites Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (2002, Vol IV, 1372)

[15] Bourke , A. The Irish Traditional Lament and the Grieving Process' in *Women's Studies International Forum* vol 11, no 4 (1988) pp.287-91) cited in op cit 2002:vol IV

[16] Kinsella, in Kinsella T. & O'Tuama S. *An Duanaire 1600-1900; Poems of the dispossessed,* Portlaoise, Dolmen Press, 1985 (p.209) & Bourke op cit 2002: vol IV (pp1372 .trans p1378)

correct ‘sending –off’ even to the design of the coffin (the most recent being laminated with photographs of cats). Photographs of the deceased displayed by the coffin, which once would have been considered improper and only allowed post the committal, are now commonplace and with this is the general evolved use of the term ‘wake’ for the post getting together of the mourners.

The wake traditionally is from a time when families dressed their own dead and kept them in their homes. The practice of ‘waking’ comes from this custom, a time of pre-professional death services, when family members took turns to sit with the deceased so they were never left alone. This for Catholics now is more likely to take place in the church the night before, and there won’t be any talking or laughing, so it has relocated to a post wake after the committal, when the remains are no longer present.

If the original function was to guard the deceased while their spirit or soul still lingered, the post committal seeks to remember the essence (spirit) of a person, and move into the stage of memories which we will carry with us on their behalf. The wake proper was one of the last things mourners felt they could do to assist the dead, now we seek solace in how we can assist each other on their behalf.

But grief is a burden we all carry, and all will. At thirteen the loss of my beloved aunt helped me as an adult to negotiate my own children’s grief at the loss of one of their aunts some twenty-five years later. I knew it was

essential to talk about the dead, to bring any stories out, and never consign them to a silence.

While my father's best intention was to never speak of his own past, the maternal line unofficially provided a link to our dead, in stories and memories. Even while grieving, the stories could still make us laugh. This is how those ancestors and the relatives who died before my birth were spoken about so they lived in my imagination, while those I had known were kept present through this manner of talking.

And throughout my father continued to sit tight lipped, never joining in, always in a different room, nursing his private shame for a past I can only construct from shadows. He told us he was an 'orphan', and had been brought up by relatives. He would never name who they were. He never knew who his mother was. There was nothing suggesting a father. In time my mother grew to accept this, and years after his death began to speculate that he was most likely illegitimate. She felt, like he no doubt had, that this was a disgrace that was better kept silent.

At his death, we relied entirely on the Catholic liturgy to shape the ceremony, and felt guilt at our relief that we would not be expected to offer any form of spoken memorial. After the funeral my mother's remaining family sat out long enough in our house, to be respectful before they could depart awkwardly. I learned nothing about him during this session, as it seemed there was nothing to say, no stories to tell, no memories the women cared to voice. His partial version of himself prevented us from reaching beyond him to something further past,

something which my mother could reach with ease for her side of the family, but was unable to access on his behalf. There was an ancient tradition of professional mourners, women who were paid to caoin (keen) and to cry, and there were even ‘sin eaters’ who went round from village to village taking on the sins of the deceased. As we gathered back at the house after burying my father, there was an odd silence that only a professional mourner from such a past could have filled for us, and so it was left. It was for my mother to ensure that we, as his children, at least gave every appearance of being in mourning in the days which followed, which was as close to a performance of grief as any of us could muster. We wore black, we stayed indoors and we did not speak ill of the dead. In that way tradition was served.

Yet it is in the construction of the past that we remember our dead, and with nothing to guide us, his life seems to have less substance now than those remembered relatives whom I never got to meet, but who were so fondly remembered that they took on a shape and impression, as the women spoke their stories. Because in the end, that is what we remember and what we take with us.